

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000377

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SUBJECT: MOSQUE-STATE RELATIONS: ISTANBUL DEBATES ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTORATE

REF: CONSUL-GENERAL DAVID ARNETT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B&D)

¶1. (u) Subject: A new report on the relationship among religion, state, and society by TESEV, a prominent establishment Turkish think tank, has stimulated a lively discussion among Istanbul academic and media circles on the role and future of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet). TESEV's proposals may give added stimulus to discussions here on a question long debated in Anatolia: whether Turkey's form of secularism, in which all mosques are controlled by the state and religious workers are state employees, is appropriate for this aspiring EU candidate. End Summary.

¶2. (u) On February 22, the Turkey Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) held a press conference announcing the publication of a new report on religion in Turkey entitled "Can There Be a Civil, Transparent, and Democratic Religious Affairs Directorate?" On February 25, TESEV hosted a follow-up conference in Istanbul to launch discussion of their new report based on extensive research and interviews in Turkey and among the Turkish communities in Germany. The President of the Diyanet (Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate), Ali Bardakoglu, two Diyanet Vice Presidents, and a former Diyanet President participated in the conference along with a broad spectrum of academic experts and representatives from selected religious groups.

¶3. (u) The TESEV report (http://www.tesev.org.tr/projeler/rcakir_ibozan_2005.php) written by Rusen Cakir and Irfan Bozan lays out the general debate on the relationship among mosque, state, and society and criticizes the Diyanet on a number of issues. TESEV concludes that, although flawed, the solution lies not in abolishing the Diyanet (as some advocate), but in strengthening it and making it more autonomous. (Embassy Comment: TESEV has had minimal contacts with the debate on Islam and Islamic elements in Turkish society. Cakir and Bozan, for their part, are not well regarded among Islamic scholars, experts, and members of brotherhoods/lodges. End Comment.) Notable findings and recommendations of the report include:

- The Diyanet should correct its failure to provide adequate services to devout women and women's groups, as well as ensure greater professional opportunities for female religious workers;
- The Diyanet should recognize Alevis as a distinct religious group (note: Alevis are heterodox Muslims who make up a significant minority of Turkey's population), incorporate Alevi representation in the organization, and launch an expanded dialog with all of the various Alevi groups;
- The Diyanet must make its funding, revenue collection, and activities (including those of its associated foundations) more transparent;
- The Diyanet lacks sufficient personnel to staff over 23,000 positions; a situation which has left 10,000 mosques without Diyanet personnel;
- Legalizing the de facto presence of Turkey's Islamic brotherhoods (tarikats) and instituting a system of state controls over their operations should be discussed;
- The Diyanet should engage in a continuous dialog with Turkey's non-Muslim minorities (i.e., Orthodox Christians and Jews) and provide them with any necessary financial and moral support;
- Diyanet personnel dispatched to Europe should limit themselves to religious work and receive more training, especially language. Ultimately, young Turks living in those countries should be hired and trained instead. (Note: The Diyanet currently sends about 1200 imams or religious workers to service the Turkish communities in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and other countries).

¶4. (u) In his remarks at the TESEV conference, Diyanet President Ali Bardakoglu attempted to defend the Diyanet against the well demonstrated assessment that it represents only Turkey's majority Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Diyanet Vice President Mehmet Gormez admitted that the Diyanet itself is considering the possibility of autonomy. At the same time he repeatedly took the floor to correct errors in the report,

and on the way back to Ankara told a close Embassy contact that neither the TESEV nor the authors know what they are talking about. Other speakers touched on many of the issues raised in the TESEV report and leveled criticism at the Diyanet ranging from its failure to provide basic religious services to its very existence as inconsistent with secularism. Conference participants seemed to agree that the EU reform process would force Turkey to address this issue and that simply abolishing the Diyanet is not a practical option. Most of the discussion, therefore, focused on how the Diyanet should be reformed.

15. (u) The report, combined with recent recommendations from a European Council committee that Turkey eliminate religion from its identity cards and drop the compulsory requirement to take religion classes in school, has already sparked an intellectual and political debate in Istanbul on the subject. Columnists have weighed in with their views (e.g., Yeni Safak, Ahmet Tasgetiren, February 25; Zaman, Sahin Alpay, March 3).

16. (c) Comment: TESEV's report and conference may stimulate more debate among Istanbul academic and media circles, which have lagged far behind the rest of the country in questioning the Diyanet and its relation to Islamic thought and practice.

The future of the Diyanet is central to the question of the relationship between Islam, the state, and society. Although near-term consensus is unlikely, TESEV has made an important contribution by placing the issue squarely in the public domain and stimulating an open debate. TESEV Chairman Can Paker told poloff that he was pleased with the cooperation they received from the Diyanet in preparing the report. Participation in the conference and comments by senior Diyanet officials, moreover, suggest that they themselves are preparing for change. Co-author of the report Irfan Bozan told poloff most agree that the current system has failed in its basic purpose - to control religion in Turkey. What remains to be seen is what will be done about it. We will continue to track the debate and government statements or proposals to assess whether Turkey is moving in the direction of securing religious freedom and equal treatment for all groups or whether reforms are used to advance the interests and influence of some vis-a-vis others.

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